

Battle of the Bans: Freeing Huck Finn from Censorship

For years, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, published in 1884, has caused controversy and conflict. Despite being one of the first American classics, the novel has been repeatedly censored throughout the nation. Critics often say that the novel is too racist to hold a place in the American school system, and that racial issues should be considered taboo in the classroom. Others, however, argue that the racist tones in the novel are satirical, intending to mock discrimination based on skin color through exaggerated representations of characters and scenarios in the novel.

Undoubtedly, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* includes examples of racism. But this fact should not bar the novel from being shelved in schools and libraries. Racism to perpetuate racism is an understandable taboo, but the novel repeatedly turns a purely racist reading on its head with its satirical undertones. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* provides readers with a glimpse into the past, into a time when having the wrong skin color meant being subhuman. Providing examples of the roots of racism can give students a chance to understand historic discrimination against minorities. Without this opportunity, the history and long term effects of racism cannot be fully realized by students in the classroom. Censoring *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the equivalent to censoring the past; that, more than anything, is the real taboo that should be fought against.

The release of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* came nearly two decades after the American Civil War's end. While there are frequent references to slavery and racism (particularly the use of the "n" word) in the novel, these are intended to be satirical. Twain was not a supporter of slavery; despite his father and uncle being slave owners, Twain married the daughter of an Abolitionist (Carey-Webb 24). He also stated that the Emancipation Proclamation

“set the black slaves free, but set the white man free also” (Twain, “Speeches”). In Twain’s eyes, slavery did not have a place in America, and was something that white Americans should be ashamed of so much that they, too, need to be “freed” from it. Twain, husband to an Abolitionist and outward supporter of the Emancipation Proclamation, would not write a novel containing racism with the intention of instilling racist ideologies; he would, however, write about racism to criticize it.

Once published, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was generally well received by critics. Some readers, however, still found issues with the novel. They were “put off by the rough language and general unpleasantness of many of the characters” (Mulder). Many characters in the novel are gritty, such as Pap, The Duke, and The King. Interestingly, these are all white characters, which may show that readers did not like the unfavorable portrayals of southern white Americans. In addition, Huck and Jim’s colloquial speech was seen as informal and unworthy of literary praise.

The book was banned in Concord, Massachusetts a month after its release, with censors stating that “all through its pages there is a systematic use of bad grammar and an employment of inelegant expressions” (“Concord”). But while the speech was criticized, the “racist” representation of black Americans in the novel was not addressed with criticism until later years. Problems with racism only began to arise when the book became available in public schools and gained recognition as classic literature. So while *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has always been controversial, the controversy toward racism is relatively new.

More recently, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has faced nationwide criticism for its derogatory terms toward black Americans. According to the American Library Association (ALA), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was the fifth most banned book in 2007 for reasons of

racism (“Top Ten”). While the use of the “n” word is the most obvious example, there are other components in the novel that cause critics to raise eyebrows. Huck and Jim’s relationship is often called into question. Critics ask if Huck was truly sympathetic toward Jim, or if was he just a racist boy who saw himself as stuck with a slave on a raft. In addition, Jim’s dialect has been criticized, as his use of English is often broken and illegible. Along with the use of the “n” word (which appears hundreds of times), the content of the novel has critics believing that the book aims to dehumanize black Americans as a whole.

This idea, however, is preposterous; a novel that contains racist remarks isn’t racist itself. These critics lack perception toward the overall value and aims of the novel; when the novel is closely examined, it is clear that the controversial elements of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are aimed to expose racism and slavery as shameful aspect of the United States’ history.

For example, in the novel, Huck and Jim adventure through the South in search of the free states. Huck proves to be a product of the racist South, as he often questions the moral consequences of traveling with an escaped slave. An example of this is seen when Jim explains to Huck his plans for his family. Jim wants to escape to a free state and raise enough money to buy his wife and children from their slave-owner. If their “master” refuses to sell them, Jim plans to steal them from the farm. Huck becomes apprehensive about his decision to travel with Jim once he hears this.

It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before. Just see what a difference it made in him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according to the old saying, "Give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell." Thinks I, this is what comes of my not thinking. Here was this nigger, which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children—children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm. (Twain et al. 101)

Huck is “frozen” from Jim’s plans for freedom, and blames himself for not realizing that Jim would want freedom for himself and his family. He also refers to Jim’s children as the property of the slave-owner rather than acknowledging that Jim has a claim on his own children. Critics often see Huck’s conflicting views toward Jim as evidence of his racist beliefs, stating that Huck “selectively disregards a system that he ultimately believes is right” (Twain et al. 390). This examination states that Huck only disregards racism when it is convenient for him, and that overall, he is for the slavery of black Americans. While Huck’s thoughts towards Jim seem damning, they actually illustrate his internal turmoil toward the construct of slavery. Despite knowing that aiding a slave is taboo, Huck remains by Jim’s side through the novel. His views towards slavery are not black and white; he is a young boy whose opinions are change as he gains more life experience. For example, in one instance, Huck apologizes to Jim after lying about using their canoe:

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way. (Twain et al. 100)

Huck admits to “humbling” himself to Jim, suggesting that he discards his perceived racial superiority in order to show Jim compassion. Afterwards, he says that he does not regret the action, despite it being unconventional for a white Southern boy to apologize to a black slave. This passage shows Huck’s developing morality. He has been indoctrinated into believing that whites are superior to black Americans, which is evidenced when he initially regrets travelling with Jim upon discovering that Jim wants his family. However, through his own experiences, he learns to be understanding towards his fellow man. It is unrealistic to expect Huck Finn to suddenly discard all the racist thoughts he has been environmentally exposed to. But *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* shows that progress can be made. Huck’s slow progression of acceptance

toward Jim as a human illustrates to readers that racism is indeed a construct, and that whites are *not* inherently superior to black Americans. This progress could not be shown if Huck Finn was the all-accepting Southern boy that critics want him to be.

The characterization of Jim's speech is another controversial factor in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Jim's use of English is often unintelligible for readers. Jim's statement about Tom Sawyer's loyalty provides an example of his dialect:

"Well, den, dis is de way it look to me, Huck. Ef it wuz HIM dat 'uz bein' sot free, en one er de boys wuz to git shot, would he say, 'Go on en save me, nemmine 'bout a doctor f'r to save dis one?' Is dat like Mars Tom Sawyer? Would he say dat? You BET he wouldn't! WELL, den, is JIM gywne to say it? No, sah—I doan' budge a step out'n dis place 'dout a DOCTOR, not if it's forty year!" (Twain et al. 249)

Jim's speech, while difficult to read, is written to reflect the *sounds* of his words. He often pushes sounds together, missing vowels, such as when he says "f'r" and "gywne". Naysayers of the novel cite his dialect as racist, stating that "like the concept of 'nigger', Twain's depiction of black Americans, particularly Jim, represents the tendency of the dominant white culture to saddle black Americans with traits that deny their humanity" (Twain et al. 391).

Jim's speech, however, is not a jab by Twain toward black Americans. Jim has purposefully been given his own style of speaking, and his dialect aims to reflect the historical context of the novel. Jim is a slave; he has not been given the chance to be educated on the nuances of English. He can't express himself in proper English because pre-Civil War American society has robbed him of any opportunity to do so. Twain was not attempting to be racist when writing Jim's character. He was artfully showing the effects of degradation toward minorities. The idea that Jim could speak like a white, Southern slave-owner is not just unlikely, it's harmful to readers, especially those reading the novel today. Twain's expression of Jim's language may be exaggerated, but this is purposefully done to expose the differences in class and color between

characters in the novel. The effects of racism were very much alive in the setting of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and affected things such as speech. Had Twain disregarded this fact and wrote all the character's dialect the same, he would have missed a huge visual opportunity in distinguishing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*'s characters based on their education levels, which have largely been predetermined by their color.

Finally, the use of the word "nigger", often written as the "n" word, is frequently cited as the most glaring offense to be found in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The word was frequently used in 19th century America as a derogatory term for black Americans. Today, using the "n" word as a white American is like lighting fire to gasoline; the word is so taboo that its mere utterance can incite violence.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn contains numerous uses of the "n" word, making it a controversial read in school settings. According to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*, a reporter "likened the teaching of the novel to eighth grade kids to 'pulling the pin of a hand grenade and tossing it into the all-too-common American classroom.'" (387). But are today's American children so sheltered from the "n" word that reading it will come as an open invitation to use the word?

That doesn't seem to be the case, especially since today's children are more likely to come across derogatory terms through the use of the internet. Hateful language seems to be a staple of the internet; racist, homophobic, and sexist terms are used with impunity. In addition, some of the most popular songs of today use the "n" word without restriction, predominately in rap and hip hop music. The word clearly still carries the weight of past discrimination, which can be seen in reaction to when a person considered to be white uses the "n" word. The frequency with which popular culture uses the word, however, refutes the idea that the word is a "hand grenade" for

students. If anything, putting the word into a historical context (like with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) will allow students to gain a better understanding of why the word is so taboo.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn shows the past atrocities of slavery and gives insight to just why a word like the “n” word is so taboo for white Americans to say. A classroom that shies away from the realities of history cheats students of these historical accuracies. Racism was, and is, alive and very real, and it stems from cultures such as the American South before and after the Civil War. Giving context to the “n” word forces students to gain a conscious awareness of its vile connotation. Rather than have students be exposed to the term in an uncontrolled setting (such as the internet), allowing the “n” word to be heard in a controlled, educational setting gives them the opportunity to understand and gain sensitivity to why the term is a taboo.

But the advantages of teaching a novel such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are, unfortunately, not enough to persuade some parents and faculty to stop censoring the novel. After the Board of Education vs. Pico case, school districts were given the right to censor books from students, provided that the books were deemed inappropriate to the age group exposed (“Board of Ed”). This ruling overrides the obscenity laws set in place by The Miller Test, which states that books only lose First Amendment protections if they appeal to the prurient interest, include offensive sexual conduct, and lack “serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value” (“Obscenity”). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*’s inclusion of the “n” word so often is what snatches away its First Amendment protection in school settings. Peaches Henry gives insight to the sensitivity adults feel toward the novel being placed in schools, and context for the subsequent bans:

The presence of black students in the classrooms of white America, the attendant tensions of a country attempting to come to terms with its racial tragedies, and the new

empowerment of black Americans to protest led to *Huck Finn*'s greatest struggle with censorship and banning. (Twain et al. 383)

Peaches states that racial tensions, both old and new, demand consideration when choosing novels to for students in the classroom. Indeed, schools should place the safety of its students in high regard. Banning a novel that illustrates the true nature of the past, however, is a dangerous way to go about this safety, and seems to place the discomfort of students as a higher priority than the consideration toward education students about the history of racism.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn seems to have become the default scapegoat for racism in classic American novels. This designation, however, is unwarranted; the novel serves as a critique of injustices rather than one that perpetuates injustice. Justin Kaplan remarks that those who have a higher understanding of the novel and its historical context cannot possibly be offended by its content:

It seems unlikely that anyone, of any color, who had actually read *Huckleberry Finn*, instead of merely reading or hearing about it, who had allowed himself or herself the barest minimum of intelligent response to its underlying spirit and intention, could accuse it of being "racist" because some of its characters use offensive racial epithets. These characters belong to their place and time, which is the Mississippi Valley thirty years before Emancipation. (Twain et al. 378)

While Kaplan's words sting, they ring true. Oversensitivity is just as dangerous as insensitivity; by denying the truths found in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, censors risk leaving students unaware of the racial struggles of the past. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* certainly features racism, but features it in a context which questions its morality. In fact, it would be both extremely difficult and detrimental to the realities of the past to try to teach racism without giving examples of racism, regardless of whether or not they are in a narrative form, such as in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The evolving characteristics of white Americans during the post-Civil War era are incarnated in Huck Finn, who simultaneously questions the act of

travelling with an escaped slave, while continuously risking to “go to Hell” for him during their travels (Twain et al. 201).

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn strikes a dividing line between readers: those who are for the censorship of the novel, and those who are against it. The book certainly contains elements that are worth criticizing. The “n” word is used over 200 times (Walsh), Huck and Jim have an unconventional relationship, and Jim’s character is depicted as being illiterate. These criticized elements, though, are taken out of context by those who cry for censorship. The book is not inherently racist; it aims to give critical context to the racist remnants of post-Civil War America. While some students may feel uncomfortable reading the racist language found in the book, it’s impossible to deny that racism is forever ingrained in the United States’ past. By providing novels like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, this racism can be uncovered in a satirical tone and further understood with historical context. With a complete understanding of the novel and its history, only those who look to be offended will be offended by reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

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